DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 162 CE 076 461

TITLE	Staying the Course. The Relationship between Basic Skills Support, Drop Out, Retention and Achievement in Further Education Colleges.
INSTITUTION	Basic Skills Agency, London (England).
ISBN	ISBN-1-85990-068-2
PUB DATE	1997-09-00
NOTE	25p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Basic Skills Agency, Admail 524, London WC1A 1BR, England, United Kingdom; phone: 0870-600-2400; fax: 0870-600-2401; http://www.basic-skills.co.uk (free).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Academic Persistence; *Basic Skills; Dropouts; *Educational Needs; Educational Supply; Foreign Countries; *General Education; National Surveys; Needs Assessment; Performance Factors; Postsecondary Education; Remedial Instruction; *Technical Institutes
IDENTIFIERS	England; Wales

ABSTRACT

The relationship between basic skills support, dropout rates, retention, and achievement in further education colleges was examined in a study of the 15,579 full-time students who were assessed at the time of their entry into 15 English and 3 Welsh general further education and tertiary colleges. On average, just under one-third of the students were identified as needing basic skills support. Compared to students who did not receive basic skills support, students who did were nearly three times as likely to complete their courses. Three-fourths of those who received support completed their first year of college successfully (compared to just over one-half of students who received no support). Among the barriers identified as deterring students from using basic skills support services were the following: scheduling difficulties, sensitivity to the stigma attached to having poor basic skills, and students' lack of recognition of the level of basic skills required for successful completion. Fewer than half of the students identified as needing basic skills support actually received it. It was recommended that initial assessment for basic skills difficulties be extended to part-time students. (Thirteen tables/figures are included.) (MN)

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ED 419 162

STAYING THE COURSE

The Relationship between Basic Skills Support, Drop Out, Retention and Achievement in Further Education Colleges

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Acknowledgements

We are particularly grateful for the co-operation and help provided by the eighteen colleges that participated in the research.

We are also grateful to Professor John Bynner and Samantha Parsons for their help during this project.

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Published September 1997

ISBN 1 85990 068 2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- During 1995/96 we carried out research into the completion and drop-out of further education college students who have weak basic skills in 18 colleges. The 15,579 full-time students assessed on entry by these 18 colleges formed the sample for the research.

- On average just under a third of students assessed on entry were identified as needing basic skills support.

- The research found that students who got support with basic skills were almost three times as likely to complete their courses as those that didn't get support.

- Receiving basic skills support had a positive impact on achievement. Three quarters of the students that received support completed their courses or their first year successfully, compared with just over half of the students that didn't get any specific support.

- A number of barriers deter students from using basic skills support services. These include not only practical barriers such as timetabling difficulties but also sensitivity to the stigma attached to having poor basic skills and students' lack of recognition of the level of basic skills required for successful completion.

- Basic skills support is a relatively new area in many colleges. However, most colleges now assess students to identify basic skills needs and basic skills support services have expanded significantly during the past few years.

- Less than a half of all of the students identified as needing basic skills support in these 18 colleges actually received it. Sometimes this was because the scale of need outstripped the help available; sometimes because students just didn't want to take up the opportunities made available by the college.

► **We believe that this research suggests that:**

- initial assessment for basic skills difficulties should be extended to all students, whether part or full-time students;
- research should be commissioned to identify barriers which deter students from taking up basic skills support;
- more reliable systems to collect data about students' basic skills needs and their use of support services should be developed;
- all colleges should 'track' students assessed as requiring support with basic skills.

BACKGROUND

By basic skills we mean:

> ***'the ability to read, write, and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general.'***

IN Wales basic skills includes the ability to read and write Welsh for people whose first language or mother tongue is Welsh.

Basic skills are essential in almost every aspect of life. They are the crucial 'gateway' skills to further education, training and employment and the key foundation for young people and adults taking education and training courses.

A significant number of people in the UK have problems with basic skills. Research we have commissioned over a number of years has suggested that about 1 in 6 people over the age of 16 have very real difficulties with reading, writing and basic maths. In addition almost half a million people have difficulties with English because it's not their first language.

BASIC SKILLS AND FE COLLEGES

WE know that a substantial number of students enrolling on further education college courses have difficulties with basic skills. Without help many are likely to struggle with course work and assignments.

The need for learning support, including help with basic skills, has grown in the last few years. Most colleges have responded positively to national targets designed to increase participation in further education and to demand for further education. This has increased the number of people taking college courses. It has also meant that the population of many colleges is more diverse and includes students from many sections of the community that have not traditionally taken up further education.

More and more young people want to remain in education after they leave school; they want to improve their skills and get better qualifications. Some are not high achievers, a significant number need additional help if they are to benefit from further education. In addition more adults are joining colleges. Some go to college as part of their training commitment as an employee. Others just want to update existing skills or learn new ones. Good basic skills have become more important in recent years, as work organisation changes and information technology has a major impact on working practices.

Despite these developments *Learning Works*[1], the final report of the Further Education Funding Council's Widening Participation Committee, argues that those groups that have not traditionally participated in further education remain under represented in colleges. *Learning Works* proposes a radical agenda to tackle under participation and underachievement. Its recommendations include redistributing resources towards those with less success in earlier learning, establishing a lifetime entitlement to education up to Level 3 ('A' level equivalent) and providing programmes of learning support as part of new pathways to learning. These measures will, as the report recognises, increase the need for effective basic skills support to make sure that those currently out of education can get access to opportunities, participate successfully and make progress.

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1. *Learning Works – Widening Participation in Further Education*. Further Education Funding Council. 1997.

ASSESSING NEED

HOWEVER different the demands of each curriculum area in colleges are, students need good underpinning skills. They need to be able to read and write competently and fluently and manipulate numbers with confidence. Because colleges know this, most have introduced assessment procedures to help identify the basic skills needs of individual students.

Many have used an assessment tool we developed, *Assessing Reading, Writing and Maths*.[2] This relates an individual's basic skills level to a set of objective Standards we devised in the early 1990s. These Standards describe how and to what level people need to use communication and numerical skills when doing particular tasks. They operate at a number of levels which can be broadly mapped to NCVQ Key Skills Levels:

Basic Skills Standards	NCVQ Key Skills
Communication	*Communication Skills*
Foundation	
Level 1	Level 1
Level 2	Level 2
Level 3	Level 3
Numeracy	*Numeracy Skills*
Foundation	
Level 1	Level 1
Level 2	Level 2

Standards of competence are often expressed in technical language that's difficult to understand for all bar the expert. We've tried to make our Standards understandable by giving examples of what everyone should be able to do at Level 1 of the Standards for Communication Skills and at Foundation Level in Numeracy. We think these are the minimum level everyone needs in the modern world.

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2. *Assessing Reading, Writing and Maths*. The Basic Skills Agency 1996.

Communication Skills

- **Read and understand** a short feature in a newspaper or magazine.
- **Use reference material** such as Yellow Pages or a dictionary to obtain simple information.
- **Deal with forms** such as an application form for a job.
- **Write** formal letters, reports or notes giving up to four separate ideas.

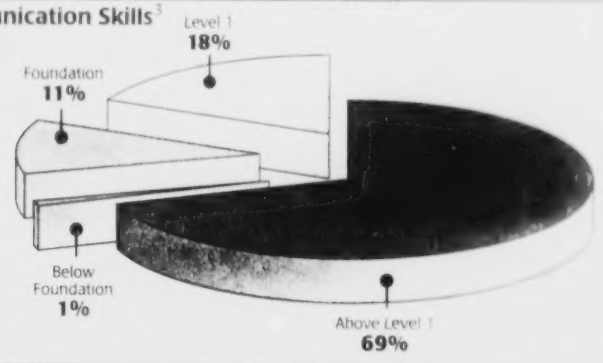
Numeracy

- **Use money** to pay in cash, checking change and receipts.
- **Plan the use of money and time.**
- **Measure and calculate areas** in metric or imperial.
- **Understand simple tables, graphs and bar charts.**

In 1994 we undertook a study of the scale of need in just under 150 colleges which had used this assessment tool. About a third of the colleges in the study assessed all full-time students. The other remaining colleges assessed selected groups of students, particularly students on courses where support with literacy and numeracy was often required. Of a total of almost 43,000 students assessed, 31% scored at or below Level 1 on the reading assessment and 44% scored at or below Level 1 on the numeracy assessment.

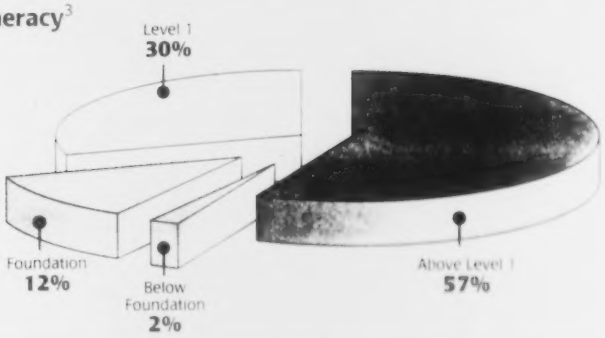
This suggested that a considerable number of students in further education colleges will need some support with basic skills. About 1 in 8 of those assessed had very weak skills in reading and slightly more had very few numeracy skills. These students were only at or below Foundation Level and would require considerable help and support in order to succeed on a college course. The 1 in 5 assessed at Level 1 in reading and the 1 in 3 assessed at the same Level in numeracy would also need some help, although this could probably be less intensive.

Communication Skills[3]



3. Figures do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Numeracy[3]



While the results of this survey were a useful indicator of the scale of need there was considerable variation between colleges so regular assessment by individual colleges is important.

The reasons students entering further education need basic skills development are many and varied.

- **Further education is a second chance for many people who were poorly motivated at school.**

- **A time lapse between leaving school and going into further education means that basic skills may have become a little 'rusty' and need to be strengthened.**

- **Different styles of teaching and learning in colleges mean that greater responsibility is often placed on students for their own learning. Many relatively new styles and approaches, such as open learning, require good basic skills.**

- **More and more courses require evidence of competence in core skills as part of the end qualification.**

BASIC SKILLS SUPPORT

Unfinished Business[4] the report of a survey of full-time educational courses for 16 - 19 year olds undertaken by the Audit Commission and HMI in 1993, indicated low success rates. Too few students in colleges achieved the qualifications they set out to gain on courses of all types. The research suggested that between 30% and 40% of students starting on a course didn't succeed. *Unfinished Business* recommended that more needed to be done to improve retention.

Colleges have introduced a number of measures to improve retention and completion rates. Better interview and induction procedures and more effective advice and guidance have enabled colleges to match students and courses more appropriately. Many colleges have also developed basic skills support for students needing additional help with language, literacy and numeracy skills. In England, the introduction of Additional Unit Funding for students requiring literacy, numeracy and language support has made specific funding available to colleges for basic skills support.

It's important to be clear about what basic skills support is. Basic skills support is additional help for students who may find their vocational or academic courses too difficult because of problems with basic skills. It's different from language, literacy and numeracy programmes where the ***main purpose*** of someone being on the programme is to improve their basic skills. Basic skills support is also distinct from provision for students with learning difficulties or other identified special needs.

Most colleges make basic skills support available through workshops, often offering drop-in and timetabled support for individuals and groups. Some colleges have also developed partnership-teaching, where basic skills specialists and course tutors work together to provide support as part of an academic or vocational course. This partnership-teaching helps colleges to provide support for students reluctant to use workshops. It also helps relate work to strengthen basic skills to the student's academic or vocational course.

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4. *Unfinished Business* — The Audit Commission and OFSTED: Full-time educational courses for young people aged 16-19: HMSO: 1993.

EVALUATING BASIC SKILLS SUPPORT

BASIC skills support is a relatively new area in many colleges. Research we commissioned in 1994/95[5] suggested that priority has, understandably, been given to agreeing policies and planning and implementing systems of assessment and support. Less attention has been given to monitoring the take-up of support, the evaluation of provision and the benefits in improved student retention and achievement rates.

During 1995/96 we carried out research on completion and drop-out amongst students assessed as needing help with basic skills at eighteen colleges of further education. For the purposes of the research basic skills support was defined as:

'support which is additional to a student's main course and involved students in planned delivery.'

Basic skills support includes:

- **direct tuition, but not undirected study in a learning centre;**
- **partnership-teaching arrangements;**
- **workshops which include staff trained to provide basic skills support;**
- **groups;**
- **one-to-one tuition;**
- **planned additional support by vocational staff.**

5 *Building the Framework. The development of basic skills support in further education colleges.* The Basic Skills Agency. 1996.

THE RESEARCH

THE research was conducted through a series of questionnaires that were completed by the 18 colleges during 1995/96. Data relating to demographic and student characteristics and basic skills provision within the colleges was also collected and formed the basis of a profile for each college. The research was undertaken in close collaboration with staff from the eighteen colleges who piloted the research instruments, collected the data and met regularly to confirm and standardise responses.

Statistics relating to withdrawal, retention and completion were collected at three points during 1995 and 1996. Data relating to achievement was collected during the following academic year. The data was analysed by the Social Statistics Research Unit of City University.

The main purpose of the research was to find out if basic skills support improved retention and enabled students to achieve a successful outcome. It was not intended to produce evidence of the scale of basic skills support in the colleges or to compare the quality of the support provided by different colleges.

THE COLLEGES

THE sample consisted of 15 English and 3 Welsh general further education and tertiary colleges. The colleges are drawn from 7 of the 9 FEFC regions in England and from north and south Wales. As a sample they reflect considerable diversity in size, location and the profile of their student populations.

Table 1: Sample colleges

College	Region	Catchment Area	Sites	Size (Total Student Enrolments)	% of Full-time Students
A	Greater London	U	M	Medium	13%
B	Yorks & The Humber	M	M	Small	28%
C	North West	M	M	Small	20%
D	North West	U	M	Large	35%
E	West Midlands	M	M	Large	25%
F	Wales	R	S	Small	17%
G	Northern	U	M	Medium	29%
H	South West	M	M	Medium	34%
I	Wales	M	M	Medium	34%
J	South West	R	M	Medium	29%
K	Yorks & The Humber	U	M	Small	39%
L	Yorks & The Humber	U	S	Medium	17%
M	East Midlands	U	M	Large	26%
N	North West	M	S	Small	17%
O	East Midlands	M	M	Small	28%
P	East Midlands	U	S	Small	20%
Q	East Midlands	U	M	Medium	25%
R	Wales	M	S	Medium	17%

Notes. *Catchment Areas* – U = Urban; R = Rural; M = Mixed.
Sites – S = Single (1 main site); M = Multi (2 - 4 main sites).
Size (Total student enrolments) – Small = under 6,000; Medium = 6,000-10,000; Large = over 10,000.

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The 18 colleges form five distinct groups that share a number of common characteristics. The colleges in Groups 1, 2, 3 and 4 are similar to the others in their group in terms of the demographic characteristics of their catchment areas, their student population, the scale of basic skills need revealed by assessment and the level of take up of basic skills support. Group 5 consists of a single college that is distinctive because it has a much higher proportion of students from ethnic minorities than the other colleges in the sample. The average scores for the 5 groups of colleges across the variables used to group them are given in Table 2.

Table 2: College clusters

	All	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
% post 16 staying on rates	65	63	77	65	53	74
% unemployed in local area	11	9	10	6	18	19
% of students from ethnic minorities	11	6	5	18	13	56
% of students between 16-20	30	29	28	51	23	29
% screened, assessed at/below Level 1	30	20	34	27	41	45
% of those assessed at/below Level 1 receiving support	46	46	25	42	66	66
Number of colleges	18	7	4	2	4	1

All 18 colleges had been providing basic skills support for at least two years. All had had assessment procedures in place for at least a year before the research began. Computerised management information systems (MIS) had also been set up in the colleges but these had not been widely used to find out information about the need for and take up of basic skills support. However, the colleges thought that their internal information systems were effective.

All of the colleges offer additional basic skills support through workshops. These workshops provide specialist help to students on courses across the college. In some colleges, support with basic skills is also available in

dedicated basic skills or programme area workshops. Additional on course support is provided in tutorials, vocational and core skills sessions and timetabled basic skills classes. Some on course support involves partnership-teaching. The options available to students in each of the colleges are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Methods of Delivery used for Basic Skills Support

	Workshop			On-Course in			
	Cross-college	*Programme Area*	*Adult Basic Skills*	*Tutorials*	*Vocational Sessions*	*Core Skills Sessions*	*Classrooms*
College A	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	
College B	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
College C	✔		✔				
College D	✔	✔			✔	✔	✔
College E	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	
College F	✔				✔		
College G	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔
College H	✔						✔
College I	✔					✔	
College J	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
College K	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
College L	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
College M	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	
College N	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
College O	✔		✔		✔	✔	✔
College P	✔				✔	✔	
College Q	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔
College R	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
	18	8	10	11	15	15	11

THE STUDENTS

DURING induction in September October 1995 the colleges assessed full-time students on the first year of a course. They used the reading assessment in our assessment tool *Assessing Reading and Maths*.

Students scoring at or below Level 1 on the assessment are likely to lack the literacy skills needed to complete their course successfully and achieve a positive outcome. The research tracked all of the students who had scored at or below Level 1 when assessed. Table 4 gives some examples of what further education college students should be able to do if they are at Level 1 of the Basic Skills Standards.

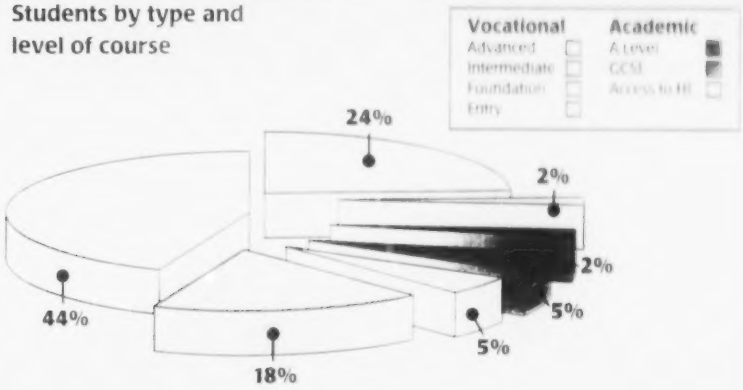
Table 4: Basic Skills Competences at Level 1

BSA Standards: Level 1 Communication	
Examples of competences	*Applications*
Understand and act on written information	• Motor vehicle service records • Customer letter of complaint • Patient profile, residential home
Consult reference source	• PC user manual • CD ROM – Encarta, to access course information • Dictionaries
Complete a simple form	• Accident report form • Business requisition form • Client/customer record cards
Write letters, reports, notes and other messages	• Letter of complaint • Telephone messages • Instructions, layout of room for function/meeting

We didn't include students enrolled on basic skills and English as a Second Language (ESOL) programmes in the sample because this would have skewed the results.

A total of 15,579 students were assessed and 4,470 of these were tracked through the year. Almost 9 in 10 (88%) of the students assessed were on vocational courses: the majority at Intermediate Level. The rest (12%) were on academic courses and these were mainly GCSE and 'A' level courses.

Students by type and level of course

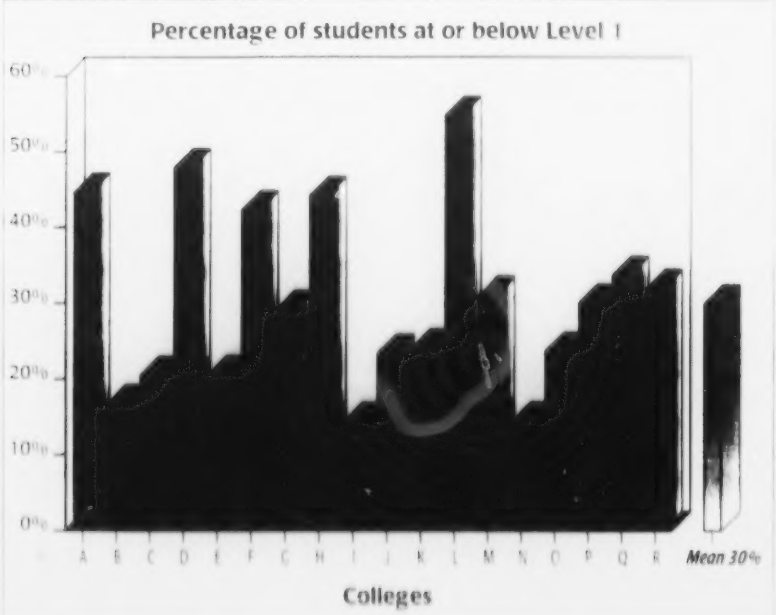


MAIN FINDINGS

Need

- On average 30% of students assessed scored at or below Level 1 and needed basic skills support. (This scale of need is similar to the scale of need in studies we undertook in 1992 and 1994).

- The scale of need varied considerably between different colleges.



Access to Support

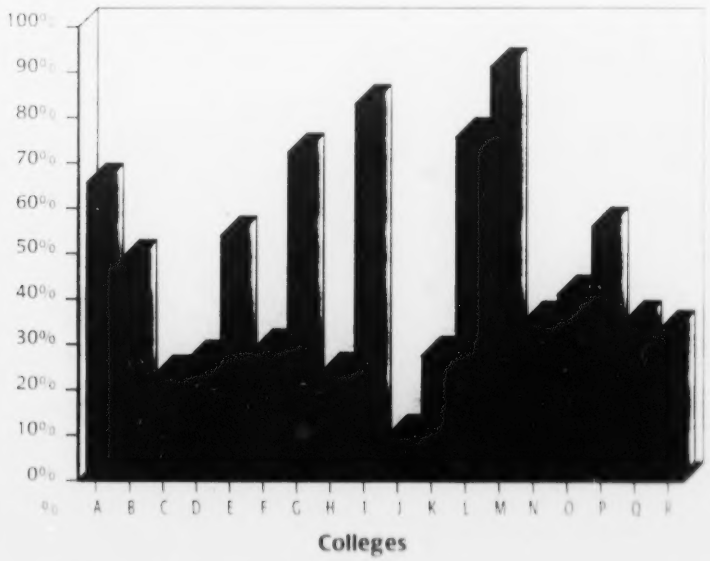
- In general basic skills support had not begun when data was first collected in November 1995. Initial withdrawal rates show that of all students assessed in September, 7% had withdrawn from college by 1st November. This fell to 6% for students without basic skills difficulties and increased to 8% for students with difficulties.

- Lack of early support with basic skills appears to have some impact on withdrawal, although a number of other factors play a part in students leaving a course in the first few weeks.

- **Just under half (45%) of students assessed as needing support with basic skills received support between November 1995 and May 1996. The majority of students assessed as needing help with basic skills didn't get any additional support.**

- **The extent to which students did get support with basic skills varied considerably from college to college. In one college only 1 in 6 got support (16%); at the other end of the spectrum in another of the sample colleges 9 in 10 (91%) students got support with basic skills.**

Percentage of students at or below Level 1 receiving support



- **There are a number of barriers that may deter college students from getting additional support with basic skills.**

- **Sometimes students are not told the results of assessment or don't understand what the results mean. Sometimes a student's timetable makes it hard to take-up support. However, the most important barrier is often attitude. Young adults in particular, are sensitive to the stigma attached to poor basic skills and this acts as a real deterrent. Just as importantly they may also doubt whether improving these skills is essential to getting through their course.**

- **Some students are also reluctant to use even the best workshops when attendance is an addition to their course timetable and singles them out from other students. So take-up of basic skills support tends to be higher where support is provided as an integral part of the course rather than an optional extra.**

- **The research didn't indicate a consistent relationship between the scale of need within a college and the level of take-up. It's not always the case that colleges with a relatively small scale of need are providing for a higher proportion of those needs. Rather a picture emerges of substantial variation in colleges' ability to make provision for this group of students.**

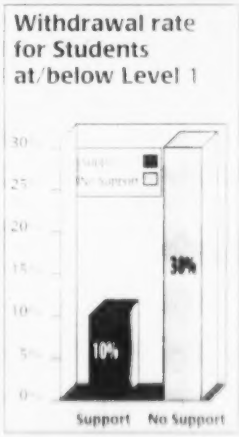
Table 5: Levels of need and the take-up of basic skills support

	% of students at or below Level 1	% of students at or below Level 1 receiving support
College A	45	66
College B	17	49
College C	20	23
College D	48	26
College E	20	54
College F	42	29
College G	29	72
College H	44	24
College I	14	83
College J	23	10
College K	23	27
College L	55	76
College M	31	91
College N	14	35
College O	23	41
College P	30	56
College Q	34	35
College R	32	33

- Similarly there's no correlation between the number of students receiving support with basic skills and the amount of support they received. It doesn't appear to be the case that where few students took-up additional support, those that did got substantially more of it.

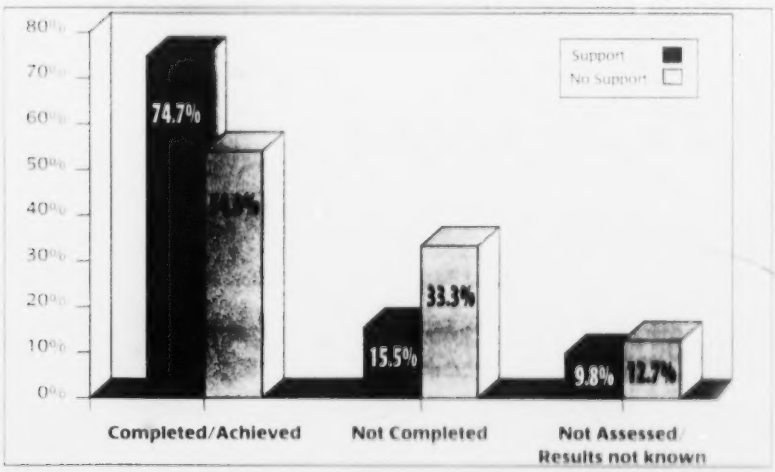
Support and Course Completion

- We defined withdrawal as leaving a college not just changing a course or mode of attendance. Where a student got support with basic skills they were much less likely to drop-out of college. Whereas only 1 in 10 (10%) of the 2,013 students receiving basic skills support during the year dropped-out, almost 1 in 3 (30%) of the 2,457 students with basic skills difficulties that didn't get support dropped-out.



Support and Achievement

- In November 1996 the colleges in the research were asked to return data on the:
  - number of students in the sample on two year courses who had successfully completed their first year;
  - number of students on one year courses that had achieved half or more of the units of a qualification or had gained the full qualification;
  - number of students failing to achieve a qualification.



- **Unfortunately 3 colleges in the research were unable to supply accurate information about achievement because of problems with their MIS systems. Therefore, information about achievement is based on data from 15 colleges.**

- **Getting support with basic skills has a significant impact on achievement.**

- **Of the students that received support three-quarters completed their courses, or their first year. Of those needing but not getting support with basic skills only just over half completed their course, or the first year. (11 colleges returned data on a relatively small number of students on vocational courses who had not been assessed or did not know the results of their final assessments at the time this data was collected).**

ISSUES

BASIC SKILLS support has developed significantly during the past four years as colleges have introduced assessment, established workshops employing specialist staff to provide support and deployed specialist staff to liaise and work with course tutors. Considerable progress has been made during a period of rapid change and growth. However, this research suggests that much still needs to be done to strengthen and improve the assessment of need and the provision of basic skills support. An important agenda of work remains.

Assessment

The development of college assessment policies and strategies has led to more students being assessed and a more systematic collection and analysis of information from assessment. Many colleges now assess all full-time students and use the information gained in strategic planning. However, assessment of part-time students to identify where basic skills support is needed is not undertaken widely.

Yet part-time students are likely to have at least the same levels of need as full-time students. ***Assessment of students taking substantial part-time courses should be introduced by all colleges.*** This would provide a more comprehensive picture of the scale of need for support with basic skills in a college. It would also help colleges provide appropriate support leading to less drop-out and better outcome rates.

The timing of assessment is critical. Where students had enrolled on a course and signed a general learner agreement only to find out that a significant additional commitment was needed to develop their basic skills, they were sometimes reluctant to take up the offer of support. ***Colleges need to provide better and early information to potential students about assessment and basic skills support.***

Access to Support

This research suggests that many students needing support with basic skills don't take up the opportunities available. ***Colleges need to make a concerted effort to remove barriers that stop students taking up additional support.*** These include making:

- support accessible to students on all sites and available at times that suit them;
- a range of support available to suit the needs of individual students and different course groups;
- sure that the support available suits less well motivated students and those with few independent learning skills;
- marketing support with basic skills as positively as possible, particularly to young adults;
- sure that the amount of basic skills support is more closely matched to the scale of assessed need.

Data collection, monitoring and evaluation

Staff of colleges in this research responsible for collecting data reported that they had had difficulty getting the information they needed from college management information systems (MIS). They said that centrally held data was sometimes incomplete and unreliable. This was particularly the case for information about achievement. In some cases, this data had not been

entered on any MIS. Most had to set up paper based systems to track students in the sample and this was extremely time consuming.

It is important to recognise that cross college information systems were relatively new to colleges at the time the research was carried out and hadn't been used previously to get information about basic skills needs or the use of support services. ***Colleges need to take steps to identify more effectively data that should be collected and to determine how it can best be used to inform planning.***

The colleges in the research reported that, as a result of taking part in the research, information held centrally has been extended to include the results of assessments and the use of basic skills support services. In several colleges databases have been established by basic skills support services and students identified as needing support will be tracked during their time in college.

CONCLUSION

THIS research indicates that many students enter further education with fairly low levels of literacy skill. This is not, perhaps, surprising given the increase in the number of young people staying in education after they leave school, the increasing number of adults taking up learning opportunities later in life and the success of colleges in the further education sector in attracting students who never used to take part in further education. It indicates that a fairly substantial number of students in colleges need some additional support with basic skills. If they get it they are less likely to drop-out and more likely to get a worthwhile qualification when they leave college.

Poor basic skills are not, of course, the only factor in dropping-out of college or failing to achieve much at the end of a course. It would be unduly simplistic to claim that it is. But if colleges are to attract the less advantaged, welcome the disillusioned and help people who feel they failed at school, effective support with basic skills will be essential. This research proves that the gamble so many colleges took in developing support has worked.

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ISBN 1 85990 068 2

Design: Studio 21

The Basic Skills Agency

Registered Charity No: 1003969